

MY FRIEND BILLIE RAWSON The ADVENTURES OF A RETIRED SECRET SERVICE MAN

BY JOHN KENDRICK BANGS

The Case of Ezekiel Rivers

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IN the early part of last summer my old friend Billie Rawson, a retired member of the secret service, and I took a vacation together. He was tired and so was I, and to satisfy our respective needs for sleep and rest we sought out a retired spot on the Maine coast known generally only to its own inhabitants, to a few artists who found in its rocky coast line an infinite variety of material for the exploitation of their brushes and sense of color, and to the favored few sojourners at its hotel, a small wooden structure accommodating twenty people at most and bearing the appropriate name of the Fairview.

The chief industries of the town were fishing and yarn spinning—the latter not the work of women with a loom or wheel, but of the fishers as they congregated on stormy afternoons at the village store to swap experiences. I had happened upon it a few years before when I had gone thither as a reporter on a Boston newspaper to get the story of a wreck that had occurred there in which there was a considerable loss of life. Its isolation had appealed to my occasional desire for getting away from the things of the hurly-burly world, and the plight of its people—for they were wretchedly poor, living for the most part on each other's necessities—had made an equally strong appeal to my sympathies. They were a fine lot, taking them as a whole, possessed of no little natural humor, as the yarns they told attested; proverbially honest, but for the most part weighed down by their possessions in land, much of which had been mortgaged to astute land boomers who had visions of a great future for the coast-lying stretches and who were only too ready to loan money on those seemingly barren acres in the hope, not infrequently realized, of some day becoming the owners thereof through foreclosure proceedings. I felt sure that two or three weeks spent in the atmosphere of Oakum Point would suffice to put both Rawson and myself again upon our feet.

"You don't have to woo sleep there, Billie," I said to him. "Insomnia at Oakum Point is as rare as icicles at Panama."

"Oakum Point for me," was Rawson's laconic response, and as a result two weeks later we were established bag and baggage at the Fairview. At the time of our arrival, besides the landlord and his wife and the freckled-faced boy who represented the "help," there were only three other occupants of the house, all of them artists resolved to be on the scene early before the dust of summer had served to dull the luster of the crisp freshness of the land and seascape.

Walter Berrien, the famous marine painter, was one of them; one of his pupils—a fresh, breezy young fellow named Wilkinson—was the second, and the third was a middle-aged spinster.

With Berrien and Wilkinson we speedily fraternized, but Miss Horncastle would not even be a sister to us. In fact, we rarely saw her save at breakfast, and even then we had to get down early to do it. She had a way of starting out before 8 o'clock with the impedimenta of her art—paint box, folding easel, and three-legged canvas stool—and for all we saw of her again during the day the earth or the sea might as well have swallowed her.

For myself my interest in the lady waned after the second or third day, but it was not so with Rawson. At sight of her my companion was so visibly impressed that I rather rallied him upon the subject. Rawson as a rule took so little interest in women that it amused me to observe his furtive glances in her direction upon the few occasions when the lady was in evidence.

"Into all lives some rain must fall," I warbled subtly. "What's up, Rawson? Has that granite heart of yours been finally drilled, blasted, and the poor remnants driven sky high into the empyrean?"

"What are you talking about?" he retorted.

"Don't lose your heart, Billie," said I. "She's plain as they make 'em and I don't honestly think she could either make you happy or support you in the style to which you are accustomed."

"Who?" growled Rawson, with a frown.

"Miss Horncastle," I replied.

"Go to the devil!" laughed Rawson. "I left my heart in my safe deposit box at home. No fear of its being shipwrecked on the coast of Maine."

He paused a moment.

"Don't repeat that joke, Jenkins," he said gravely. "Especially in the presence of Berrien and Wilkinson. I have a particular reason for it."

Of course I promised, but it puzzled me nevertheless to observe that Raw-

son's interest in the woman rather increased than diminished. After the fifth morning he began to rise early and to station himself at the window in order to watch her departure, and once I caught him following her progress down the road toward the fishermen's huts with his fieldglasses. There was that in his face at the moment that forbade the flippant remark I was about to make when I took in what he was doing, so I merely contented myself with the general inquiry:

"Any big vessels in sight?"

"No," said Rawson, "but it's wonderful how clear the air is today. I can see the rounding of Cape Mousam as plainly as though it were fifty feet away."

I indulged in an inward chuckle. "Cape Mousam indeed!" I thought. "More likely it's Horncastle Point."

"I feel like a walk," said Rawson, an hour or two later. "These fishermen interest me hugely, Jenkins. Let's go down to the cove and pay our respects."

"Better wait till this afternoon," said I. "They're probably all out on the briny. They start about 4 in the morning and come in at two."

"Oh, well—let's go down anyhow," said Rawson. "We might fall in with some of them. They don't all fish all the time, do they?"

"Pretty nearly," said I. Nevertheless I fell in with his plans, as usual, and a little while later we found ourselves among the group of weatherbeaten hovels in which the men who go down into the sea have their homes. With the usual Rawson luck, we found one of them in, a certain Ezekiel Rivers, a man whose externals were as weatherbeaten as his house and whose inner self seemed as inscrutable as the ways of the vast ocean from whose depths he wrung his precarious livelihood. He was sitting in his doorway mending a net.

"Good morning," said Rawson, pausing before him and gazing out upon the sea.

"Mornin'," was the laconic response.

"Fine day," said Rawson.

"Yes," said Rivers. "Pretty likely mornin'."

"Fishing good?" asked Rawson.

"Hain't tried it this mornin'," said Rivers. "Guess it's about the same as usual. These pesky dogfish gits most of 'em."

"I wonder if you ever take people out with you?" vouchsafed Rawson.

"Sometimes I does and sometimes I don't," was the noncommittal response. "D'pends on who they be."

"How about my friend and me?" asked Rawson.

"Be you artists or boarders?" queried Rivers.

"We're boarders," laughed Rawson. "Why?"

"I'll take ye," said Rivers. "If ye'd ben artists I'd hev to think about it. Tell the truth, he opened up, 'we don't set much store by them paintin' fellers. They come up here and paint us an' our houses, an' our rocks, an' I haven't seen a nickel comin' my way from the hull dod-gasted crew of 'em. Don't seem exactly fair. We own the land, and they paint it. We pay taxes and interest money, but they gits all that's ever raised from York to Portland. Tain't ekilized enough."

"When will you take us out?" asked Rawson.

"Oh, most any time—when I'm goin'," said Rivers. "I can't do it for nothin', though."

"Naturally not," said Rawson. "We'll be only too glad to pay. What's the tax?"

Rivers scratched his grizzled beard for a moment before answering.

"I'm afear'd," he said finally, "I'll have to charge ye a quarter apiece. But," he added hastily as if in fear that the total sum loomed too large in our minds, "I'll supply ye with bait an' tackle."

Rawson and I upon consultation decided that the price was a reasonable one, and the bargain was consummated.

The day following was very wet and we all of us stayed indoors. Miss Horncastle did not appear at all, preferring to remain quietly in her room, apparently.



"How shall the duty be paid?" she asked in a hoarse whisper.

I was just about to begin on a story in a week-old newspaper designed to show how deeply a certain billionaire had wronged the State of Iowa when a temporary diversion was afforded us by the ringing of the telephone bell. It had not happened before that I was aware of, and breaking in suddenly upon the stillness of the office, it naturally attracted more than the usual attention.

"Hello," said the proprietor, taking down the receiver. "Who is this?"

"What? ... Oh—the Postal Union Telegraph Company at Mousam. ... Yes—I got it. ... Telegram for Miss Horncastle? Yes. She's here. Wait a minute till I get my pencil."

The landlord left the phone and went to his table for a pad and pencil. I glanced at Rawson, and observed that he held his cigar with a firm grip between his teeth, and although he appeared to be studying a railroad map I could tell from his expression that his mind was intent upon something else.

"Billie," I began.

"Shut up!" he growled, in a guttural whisper.

"All right—go ahead," said the landlord returning to the phone. "From Portland, Maine. Yes. I've got that. ... What's that? ... Tomorrow? ... Tomorrow what? ... Ducks? ... That's a queer message. Only just tomorrow ducks? ... All right. What's signed to it? ... Nothing? That's funny, too. All right. I'll send it up. You're sure it's just tomorrow ducks and no signature? ... Good. That's a short telegram when you can send ten words for 65 cents, eh, Jim? ... Ha—ha! That's true. Some people ain't alive to their chances, be they? Good-by."

Our host departed for the upper regions to deliver the message to Miss Horncastle, and on his return Rawson offered him a cigar, which he accepted with a smile of pleasure.

"What sort of a chap is Ezekiel Rivers, Mr. Burrows?" asked Rawson as the latter lit the cigar.

"Oh—he's a good sort," said Burrows. "Everybody likes Zeke. He's had pretty hard luck here in his day. Used to own a good part of this coast, but he had sickness in his family, an' he had to mortgage most of it. Takes all he can earn payin' interest."

"No foreclosure proceedings, I hope," said Rawson.

"Well, that's what we've been expectin', but somehow or other Ezekiel fixed up the last one," said the landlord.

"Where he ever raised the money I don't know, but by Jinglo, last month when old Barnes—he's head of a land promotin' company from down your way—came up here from New York to sell him out, Zeke planked down his \$2,000 and cleaned the thing up. He must 'a' had more in his stockin' than we had any idee on. Still everybody was glad—except old Barnes. He was mad as a hornet. He'd had his eye on the rock pasture for a summer hotel an' he'd 'a' got it dirt cheap for \$2,000."

"I liked Rivers, too," said Rawson. "I met him the other day and took a decided interest in him. He's going to take us out with him tomorrow."

After lunch—or rather dinner, always a midday function at Oakum Point, Rawson proposed another visit to Rivers.

"We must arrange for tomorrow," he said.

"Why tomorrow?" I asked, not because I had any objection to the time, but for the reason that I was now pretty sure that Rawson had stumbled with his usual luck upon something interesting and I was consumed with curiosity to know what was up.

"The tide will be favorable for—well, for fishing," said Rawson. "We're going to make a haul tomorrow, Jenkins," he added significantly.

"Crime?" I asked.

"Well—something pretty fishy," said he. "You'll know all about it day after tomorrow."

We found Rivers' door closed, but a good rap upon it brought him to us. "How about taking us out tomorrow, Mr. Rivers?" asked Rawson.

"All the same to me," replied the fisherman. "Start at 5. Too early for ye?"

"Not for me," said Rawson.

We entered the hut and sat watching the old fellow at work, Rawson drawing him out as only he can do. We had been with Rivers an hour when a curious knocking was heard on the door. Three slow raps and two in quick succession.

Rivers sprang to his feet and rushed to the door. On opening it he disclosed the angular form of Miss Horncastle.

"Are you alone?" she asked.

"No," he answered. "I have—"

"Well, don't let me disturb you," said she. "I just came to tell you. It's tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?" gasped Rivers.

"Why?"

"There must be no whys about it, or butts, or ifs," came the woman's voice sharply. "Tomorrow or not at all."

"All right," said Rivers hoarsely. "Only I—"

"Will you go, or won't you?" demanded Miss Horncastle.

"Of course I'll go," said Rivers.

"Very well. That's decided on. You must not fail. The word is ducks. Don't forget," he said. "I—er—I promised to—to set for my picture for Miss Horncastle about noon."

"Fine," said Rawson. "That will suit me to a T. Fact is, I didn't care about

staying out all day anyhow. We'll just get a taste of it until 9 or 10 o'clock and then come back. Eh, Jenkins?"

"That suits me," said I.

"All right," said Rivers. "I promised to take you and it ain't for me at my time o' life to begin backin' out o' my bargains."

The following morning found us bounding airily over the sea in Rivers' dory, and it was indeed exhilarating. By 6:30 we were well out upon the ocean, and I managed to land a few mackerel and cod with not much difficulty. Rawson, on the other hand, was not a success at fishing. He seemed abstracted and I doubt if he had had a nibble from a whale he would have known it. Everything went uneventfully until about 9 o'clock, when we were hailed by a passing schooner.

"Ahoy there!" came from the deck of the schooner.

"Ahoy yourself," returned Rivers, standing, a grim, set expression coming into his face.

"What's the good word?" cried the voice on the vessel.

"Ducks," returned Rivers, winking at me, whereupon I laughed, and Rawson began to take notice.

"What's the news from Boston?" called the man on the schooner.

"Nothin' much," returned Rivers.

"Hain't seen a paper for two weeks?" "Say, captain," cried the man on the schooner, "is there a postoffice where you come from?"

"There be," said Rivers.

"Well, say—want to do me a favor? I got a bunch o' letters here I forgot to mail up at Portland. Put 'em in the box for me, will you?"

"Chuck 'em over," replied Rivers.

He pulled the dory close to the schooner's side, and the fellow on board of her tossed a square package over the rail into Rivers' hands.

"I'll do as much for you some day," he cried as the schooner passed us.

"Don't mention it," said Rivers. "These fellers seem to take me for the rural free delivery," he chuckled as we turned about.

"Do it often?" asked Rawson.

"Oh, off an' on," said Rivers.

"Well," said Rawson, looking at his watch. "I guess we'd better be going in, Mr. Rivers. You'll be late for that appointment with Miss Horncastle."

"Oh, I guess she can wait," said the old man carelessly. "My face ain't likely to change much afore tomorrow."

"Still," persisted Rawson, "we ought not to keep the lady waiting."

"It's just as you say," said the fisherman, and we headed for Oakum Point. Arrived at the cove, we stepped on shore and repaired at once to Rivers' hut.

"It has been a fine day, Mr. Rivers," said Rawson, "and we are indebted to you for more than a quarter's worth. Rivers laughed.

"Ye didn't have much luck," said he. "Well, our luck is going to begin now," said Rawson, his face becoming fixed and stern. "I am sorry to trouble you, Mr. Rivers, but that package of letters, please."

The old man staggered back against his table.

"Wh—what do you mean?" he gasped, quivering like an aspen leaf.

"I want that packet of letters thrown to you from the schooner William B. Wilbur, of Portland, please," said Rawson.

"You mean—" began Rivers.

"I mean that I belong to the secret service of the United States," said Rawson; "that I have caught you red-handed in an act of smuggling, and I warn you that instant compliance with my request for that package is the only thing that can save you."

The old man sank into a chair, and Rawson seized the packet from his hands. Rapidly cutting the string that fastened it together, he tore off the paper covering, disclosing a pasteboard box, which upon being opened revealed two or three handfuls of pearls of a value certainly not less than \$75,000.

"Do you mean to tell me that you didn't know what was in that package?" demanded Rawson.

"I—I wanted to save my land,"

groaned the unhappy fisherman. "She—I—I was offered \$2,500 if I would meet the Wilbur and bring a package ashore. No," he shouted, "I didn't know what was in that package!"

"Well, you knew that \$2,500 wasn't a fair price for delivering that package into the hands of Miss Horncastle," said Rawson.

"Yes—I knew," said the fisherman. "And you knew she was part of a New York syndicate that gets its stuff in from foreign parts in this way?" Rawson went on.

"Well—yes, I knew," growled Rivers. "But I didn't want to lose my land. It's been mine and my father's and my grandfather's ever since anybody owned it and—"

The old fellow fell forward, his face buried in his hands, and broke into a storm of weeping.

"Well and good," said Rawson. "I—I don't blame you—only your excuse won't hold in the eyes of the law. I'll do what I can to save you, but—next time when it's a case of land or honor let the rocks go and hang on to the other."

We left the old man and proceeded to the hotel. Arrived there, Rawson sent his card to Miss Horncastle.

"To what am I to attribute the honor of this call?" she asked astutely.

"I should think that Mrs. Robertson Arnot, of No. 2 Wall street, would always understand the reasons for a visit from an officer of the—"

"Law?" she cried faintly.

"No—customs," said Rawson. The color returned to the lady's cheek.

"Ah," she said calmly. "It's a matter of price, is it?"

"Yes," said Rawson.

"How much?" asked Miss Horncastle, or Mrs. Arnot—whose career in the smuggling profession is sufficiently notable to require no further description from my pen.

"The full scheduled duty upon them," said Rawson, producing the box and disclosing the pearls. "And a promise, violable under penalty of exposure and full punishment for this attempted crime, never in any way directly or indirectly to molest Ezekiel Rivers for having failed to fulfill to the letter his part in this conspiracy or to breathe a word of his connection with it to a living soul."

Miss Horncastle clutched the back of her chair in an ecstasy of baffled rage.

"How shall the duty be paid?" she asked in a hoarse whisper.

"To the conscience fund," said Rawson.

The woman paced the floor like a caged tiger.

"If I refuse?" she asked.

"I know the whole gang," said Rawson. "Jail."

"If I accept?" she demanded.

"The pearls will be returned to you," said Rawson.

"When?" she blurted out.

"When the conscience fund is in receipt of your check for \$33,750," replied Rawson.

"You would not consider \$10,000 for yourself?" she asked.

"Madame," said Rawson sententiously, "I am a rich man myself and money cannot tempt me. I have an income of \$2,500 a year and I can live happily and comfortably on \$2,499. So you see, having more than I need—"

"You are a fool!" she muttered.

"I know it," said Rawson, "but I am what I am and it is too late to change. You have not answered my proposition."

"There is nothing to do but—to accept," said Miss Horncastle.

"Thank heaven!" said Rawson a week later in New York, whither we immediately returned. That gang is settled, and I have saved poor old Zeke Rivers. He has kept his land."

"Good!" said I. "Poor devil! But I say, Billie, what put you on to all this?"

"Very simple," said Rawson. "I knew Miss Horncastle the minute I laid eyes on her—she's an old hand at this sort of thing—and when I saw her making early morning calls on Rivers, thanks to my early rising and a field-glass, I knew something was doing. For the rest, like all our business, chance played the greater part."

"I thought you were in love with her," said I.

"I admire her greatly," said Rawson. "She's a dod-gasted smart woman, as Zeke would put it."

The second story of this *nightly series*, which will be published next Sunday, will be entitled "The Education of Mrs. Larabee-Williams." In it Mr. John Kendrick Bangs will relate, in his inimitable manner, another highly entertaining exploit of Billie Rawson, the retired Secret Service man.